



Hwæt...



Scop Hwīlum Sang

There occurs in the writings of Bede, an analogy between the passage of human life and that of a sparrow flying into the great hall where thanes feast, the fire is burning and the hall is warm.

While he is inside the sparrow is sheltered from the storms. But in no time at all he passes from winter to winter. So does a human life exist for just a moment of time; what goes before and what follows after, we do not know.

The rest is silence, was the postscript Shakespeare added, eight centuries later.

Anglo Saxon life was harsh and bleak and their society alien to us now, but the poetry that survives has a sad beauty that still appeals, and the noble resignation, the conviction that honour and loyalty are codes to live by, that heroism deserves recognition, and refusal to yield to the forces of evil, a hero's commitment, are part of a creed that exists today.

I have selected from Anglo Saxon poetry favourite passages, rather than transpose whole poems; this has already been done by more erudite scholars than I am; nor have I chosen to follow their translations. The passages are of my selection and my translation; if I succeed with them and the etchings they inspired, I hope I shall impart some of my own feeling for the poetry of that brutal age when -

'scop hwilum sang' -

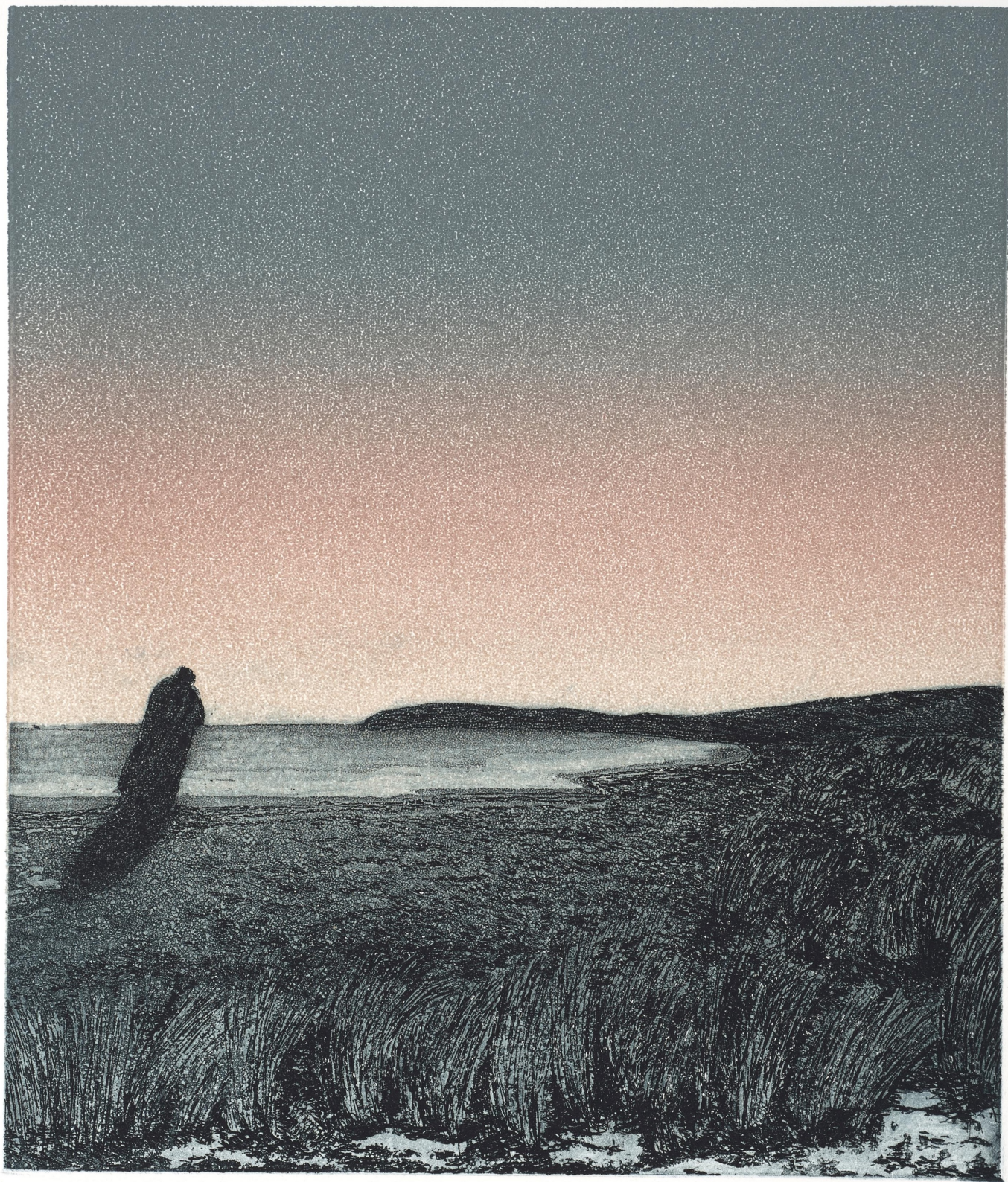
Sometimes a Poet Sang

A recurring image in Anglo Saxon poetry is of the lord and his hearth companions in the warmth of the mead-hall, the lord brave and generous to his people and they, in return, loyal and ready to lay down their lives for him. Outside, in the chill of lonely exile are those who, for some reason are lordless. Strangers to the mead-hall they must roam alone in hopeless misery, like -

The Wanderer

Often, at the dawn of each day,
 I must bewail my sorrows, alone:
 there is none of living men now,
 to whom I dare speak my heart openly.
 I know, in truth, that it is a noble custom in a man
 to bind fast the thoughts of his heart,
 keep his own counsel, whatever he may think.
 Nor can the disheartened man resist fate,
 nor angry pride avail him: for that reason,
 those eager for glory often keep secret the sadness
 in their hearts. So I, parted from my native land,
 far from kinsmen, often troubled, had to bind
 my heart in fetters since that time, long ago,
 when the darkness of the earth covered my lord
 and I went thence, sad with the gloom of winter,
 over the frozen waves, sought in sorrow
 the hall of a gold-giver wherever I could find him
 far or near, who would know me in the mead-hall
 or comfort me, friendless as I am, treat me kindly.
 He knows, who has experienced it,
 how cruel a companion is sorrow for him
 who lacks beloved protectors:
 the path of the exile is his portion,
 not twisted gold nor the riches of the earth.
 Chill at heart, he remembers retainers in the hall
 and the receiving of treasure, of how in his youth
 his lord feasted him; the joy has all perished.
 Wherefore he knows this who has long been
 deprived of the counsels of a dear friend and lord,
 when sorrow and sleep together grip the wretched
 solitary man; it seems to him in his mind
 that he embraces and kisses his lord and lays
 hands and head on his knee as he sometimes did
 in former days when he enjoyed the throne.
 Then the friendless man awakens again,
 sees before him the dark waves, the sea birds
 bathing, spreading their feathers, the hoar frost
 falling and the snow mingled with hail.
 Then heavier still are the wounds of his heart,
 with grief for his beloved.

‘Oft ic sceolde āna ūhtna gehwylce
 mīne ceare cwīpan: nis nū cwicra nān,
 þe ic him mōdsefan mīnne durre
 sweotule āsecgan. Ic tō sōþe wāt
 þæt biþ in eorle indryhten þēaw,
 þæt hē his ferðlocan fæste binde,
 healde his hordcofan, hycge swā hē wille.
 Ne mæg wērigmōd wyrde wiðstondan
 ne se hrēo hyge helpe gefremman:
 for ðon dōmgeorne drēorigne oft
 in hyra brēostcofan bindað fæste.
 Swā ic mōdsefan mīnne sceolde
 oft earmcearig ēðle biðæled,
 frēomægum feor feterum sælan,
 sipþan geāra iū goldwine mīnne
 hrūsan heolster biwrah and ic hēan þonan
 wōd wintercearig ofer wapema gebind,
 sōhte sele drēorig sinces bryttan,
 hwær ic feor oppe nēah findan meahte
 pone þe in meoduhealle [mīn] mine wisse,
 oppe mec frēondlēasne frēfran wolde,
 wenian mid wynnum. Wāt sē þe cunnað
 hū slīpen bið sorg tō gefēran
 þām þe him lýt hafað lēofra geholena:
 warað hine wræclāst, nāles wunden gold,
 ferðloca frēorig, nālas foldan blæd;
 gemon hē selesecgas and sincþege,
 hū hine on geoguðe his goldwine
 wenede tō wiste: wyn eal gedrēas.
 For þon wāt sē þe sceal his winedryhtnes
 lēofes lārcwidum longe forþolian,
 ðonne sorg and slæp somod ætgædre
 earmne ānhagan oft gebindað:
 þinceð him on mōde þæt hē his mondryhten
 clyppe and cysse, and on cnēo lecge
 honda and hēafod, swā hē hwilum ær
 in geārdagum giefstōles brēc;
 ðonne onwæcneð eft winelēas guma,
 gesihð him biforan fealwe wægās,
 bapian brimfuglas, brædan fēpra,
 hrēosan hrīm and snāw hægle gemenged.
 Þonne bēoð þý hefigran heortan benne,
 sære æfter swæsne -’



Allegiance to a crueller master is the theme of the next poem. Far from the warmth and security of the mead-hall, the 'wave-traveller' tells of the relentless lure of the sea and the hardship of his self-imposed exile on its icy waters. Not for him, the comfortable life of the landsman; his path is the whale-way, the lone-flier his companion.

Seafarer

That being who fares prosperously on land
knows nothing of how I, careworn,
have passed a winter as an exile on the icy sea,
cut off from kinsmen, hung round with icicles,
the hail flying in showers. I heard nothing there
except the sea resounding, the ice-cold wave,
at times the song of the swan.

I took my delight in the cry of the gannet
and the sound of the curlew, instead of
the laughter of men, in the screaming gull,
instead of the drinking of mead.
There storms beat against the cliffs,
there the tern with icy feathers answered them;
full often the dewy-winged eagle screamed.

That man does not know, the creature
living in luxury, what some of those suffer
who follow furthest, the paths of the wanderer.
And yet my heart even now is restless in my breast:
my mind is with the sea-flood,
over the whale's territory;
it roams far and wide over the face of the earth,
comes to me again, eager and unsatisfied;
the lone-flier screams, irresistably urges the mind
to the whale-way over the ocean tracts.

Þæt se mon ne wāt,
þe him on foldan fægrost limpeð,
hū ic earmcearig iscealdne sǣ
winter wunade wræccan lāstum
winemægum bidroren
bihongen hrimgicelum: hægl scūrum flēag.
Þær ic ne gehȳrde būtan hlimman sǣ,
iscaldne wæg, hwīlum ylfete song:
dyde ic mē tō gomene ganetes hlēoþor
and huilpan swēg fore hleahtor wera,
mǣw singende fore medodrince.
Stormas þær stānclifu bēotan, þær him
stear[n] oncwæð
isigfeþera; ful oft þæt earn bigeal
ūrigfeþra.

Þæt se beorn ne wāt,
secg ēstēadig, hwæt þā sume drēogað,
þe þā wræclāstas wīdost lecgað!
For þon nū mīn hyge hweorfeð ofer
hreperlocan,
mīn mōdsefa mid mereflōde
ofer hwæles ēpel, hweorfeð wīde
eorþan scēatas, cymeð eft tō mē
gīfre and grǣdig; gielleð ānfloga,
hweteð on [h]wælweg hreper unwearnum
ofer holma gelagu.



No virtue is more insisted on in Anglo Saxon poetry than the loyalty of a warrior to his liege lord, and nowhere is the ancient Germanic heroic code more vividly expressed than in the account of the battle between the Anglo Saxons and the Danes, at Maldon.

Earl Byrhtnoth proudly disdains to buy off the Danes with tribute, and even allows the marauders to cross the river when the tide ebbs. But although his retainers fight bravely, Byrhtnoth is slain, and the sons of Odda and others, unmindful of their lord's past generosity to them, shamefully flee. But Ælfwine remembers and urges the others to remember and avenge their lord's death. They respond magnificently until many of them lie besides their prince, 'as befits a thane'; and old Byrhtwold makes his last vow.

The Battle of Maldon

Byrhtnoth grasped his shield, brandished
 his slender spear of ash and spoke.
 Angry and resolute he made answer to him:
 'Do you hear, seafarer, what this people say?
 They will give you spears for tribute,
 poisonous shafts and ancestral swords - trappings
 of war that will be of no profit to you in the fight.
 Messenger of pirates, take word back
 to your people, tell them tidings far more hateful,
 that here stands a noble earl with his troop,
 who will defend this country, home of Æthelred,
 my prince, its people and its land; the heathens
 shall fall in battle. Shameful would it seem to me
 that you should go back to your ships unopposed
 and with our tribute, now that you have intruded
 this far into our lands, nor shall you come by riches
 so lightly: spear and sword shall reconcile us first,
 fierce battle before we yield tribute.'

Byrhtwold, the old companion, spoke,
 grasped his shield, shook his ash spear, full boldly
 exhorted the warriors: 'Mind shall be the harder,
 heart the keener, courage the greater
 as our strength fails. Here lies our prince
 quite cut down, the good man in the dust;
 forever may he mourn who now would think
 to turn from this fight. I am old now;
 I will not go from this place, but resolve to lie
 by the side of my lord, by the man so dearly loved.'

Byrhtnōð mapelode, bord hafenode,
 wand wācne æsc, wordum mælde,
 yrre and ānræd āgeaf him andsware:
 'Gehyrst þū, sælida, hwæt þis folc segeð?
 Hi willað ēow tō gafole gāras syllan,
 ættrene ord and ealde swurd,
 þā heregeatu þe ēow æt hilde ne dēah.
 Brimmanna boda, ābēod eft ongēan,
 sege þinum lēodum miccle lāpre spell,
 þæt hēr stynt unforcūð eorl mid his werode,
 þe wile geealgian ēþel pysne,
 Æþelredes eard ealdres mines,
 folc and foldan; feallan sceolon
 hāþene æt hilde. Tō hēanlic mē þinceð
 þæt gē mid ūrum sceattum tō scype gangon
 unbefohtene, nū gē þus feor hider
 on ūrne eard in becōmen;
 ne sceole gē swā sōfte sinc gegangan:
 ūs sceal ord and ecg ær gesēman,
 grimm gūðplega, ær wē gofol syllon.'

Byrhtwold maðelode, bord hafenode,
 sē wæs eald genēat, æsc ācwehte,
 hē ful baldlice beornas lārde:
 'Hige sceal þē heardra, heorte þē cēnre,
 mōd sceal þē māre, þē ūre mægen lýtlað.
 Hēr lið ūre ealdor eall forhēawen,
 gōd on grēote; ā mæg gnornian
 sē ðe nū fram þis wigplegan wendan þenceð.
 Ic eom frōd fēores: fram ic ne wille,
 ac ic mē be healfe minum hlaforde
 be swā lēofan men licgan þence.'



It has been pointed out that much of Anglo Saxon religious poetry is beset with lifeless moralising and conventional phrases, but that is not true of this poem. The radiance of the vision of the cross and the simple, devout wonder of the dreamer are as fresh as the robust portrayal of Christ advancing purposefully like a young warrior to mount the cross, of his own volition, so that he might redeem mankind.

The Dream of the Rood

'It was long ago - I remember it still - that I
 was cut down at the edge of the forest, torn from
 my roots. Strong foes carried me off from there,
 fashioned me to be a spectacle for that place,
 commanded me to raise up their felons.
 Men bore me on their shoulders there.
 I saw then the Lord of mankind hasten eagerly
 so that he might ascend me. Then I dared not
 bow down or break, against the Lord's command,
 there where I saw earth's surface tremble;
 I could have slaughtered all those foes,
 yet I stood firm. Then the young man
 who was almighty God, valiant and strong,
 stripped himself. Brave in the sight of many
 when he purposed to redeem mankind,
 he mounted on the high gallows. I trembled
 when that man embraced me, yet I dared not
 bend towards the earth, prostrate myself
 to the level of the ground, but I must stand firm.
 As a cross I was raised up, bore aloft
 the mighty king, the lord of heaven,
 I dared not bow down. They drove dark nails
 through me, the gashes are visible still,
 gaping wounds of malice: I dared not hurt
 any of them. They mocked us both together;
 I was all wet with blood poured out from
 the man's side, when he had given up his spirit.
 I have endured many grievous experiences
 on that hill: I saw the God of hosts savagely
 stretched out. Darkness with its clouds
 had covered the body of the Lord,
 the bright splendour; a shadow prevailed,
 dark beneath the firmament. All creation wept,
 mourned for the death of the king:
 Christ was on the cross.'

'Þæt wæs geāra iū (ic þæt gýta geman)
 þæt ic wæs hēawen holtes on ende,
 āstýred of stefne mīnum. Genāman mē ðær
 strange fēondas,
 geworhton him þær tō wāfersýne, hēton mē
 heora weargas hebban;
 bæron mē þær beornas on eaxlum, oð ðæt
 hīe mē on beorg āsetton;
 gefæstnodon mē þær fēondas genōge.
 Gescah ic þā Frēan mancynnes
 efsan elne micle, þæt hē mē wolde on
 gestigan.
 Þær ic þā ne dorste ofer Dryhtnes word
 būgan oððe berstan, þā ic bifian geseah
 eorðan scēatas: ealle ic mihte
 fēondas gefyllan, hwæðre ic fæste stōd.
 Ongyrede hine þā geong hælð, þæt wæs
 God ælmihtig,
 strang and stiðmōd; gestāh hē on gealgan
 hēanne
 mōdig on manigra gesyhðe, þā hē wolde
 mancyn lýsan.
 Bifode ic þā mē se beorn ymbclypte; ne
 dorste ic hwæðre būgan tō eorðan,
 feallan tō foldan scēatum, ac ic sceolde
 fæste standan.
 Rōd wæs ic āræred, āhōf ic ricne cyning,
 heofona hlāford, hyldan mē ne dorste.
 Þurhdrifan hī mē mid deorcan næglum, on
 mē syndon þā dolg gesiene,
 opene inwidhlemmas: ne dorste ic hira
 ænigum sceððan.
 Bysmeredon hīe unc bütū ætgædere; eall ic
 wæs mid blōde bestēmed,
 begoten of þæs guman sīdan, siððan hē
 hæfde his gāst onsended.
 Feala ic on þām beorge gebiden hæbbe
 wrāðra wyrda: geseah ic weruda God
 pearle þenian: þýstro hæfdon
 bewrigen mid wolcnum Wealdendes hræw,
 scīrne scīman sceadu forðeode,
 wann under wolcnum. Wēop eal gesceaft,
 cwīðdon cyninges fyll: Crist wæs on rōde. -'



The story of Judith and Holofernes is well-known, but the Old Testament heroine in this Anglo Saxon poem is cast firmly in the role of faithful retainer, whose Lord gives her victory over her enemy, honour and earthly treasures in return for her loyalty.

In response to her courage in slaying Holofernes the Hebrews rise up against their oppressors, and there is more than a suggestion of patriotic fervour in the exultation with which the poet describes the overthrow of the Assyrian invaders; at the time he was writing, his own countrymen were struggling to expel the Danes.

Judith

Then was a host of the valiant made ready,
men brave in battle, courageous warriors
and companions, they went forth, bore banners
of victory, marched straight on to the fight,
heroes beneath their helmets, from the holy city
at the very dawn of day; shields rang, resounded
loudly. At that, the lean wolf in the wood rejoiced
and the dark raven, the bird greedy for slaughter,
both knew that the warriors were minded
to prepare for them a feast of doomed men.
And behind them flew the eagle, dewy-feathered,
eager for food; dark-coated, horny-beaked,
he sang a song of war. The warriors marched on,
men ready for battle, armed with shields
of hollow linden - those who in former times
had suffered the insults of the foreigners, the taunt
of the heathen ones. For that the Assyrians
were all ruthlessly repaid in the spear-play,
when the Hebrews under their banners
had come upon their war camp. Boldly they shot
forth showers of arrows, serpents of war
from their horn bows, unwavering shafts.
Loudly shouted the fierce warriors, cast spears
into the throng of cruel ones; angry were those
native to the land against the hateful race.
Without fear they came, stout of heart,
they harshly aroused their ancient foe
overpowered as they were with mead.

þā wearð snelra werod snūde gegearewod,
cēnra tō campe; stōpon cynerōfe
secgas and gesiðas, bāron [sige]þūfas,
fōron tō gefeohte forð on gerihte,
hæleð under helmum of þære hāligan byrig
on ðæt dægred sylf; dynedan scildas,
hlūde hlummon. Þæs se hlanca gefeah
wulf in walde, and se wanna hrefn,
wælgifre fugel: wiston bēgen
þæt him ðā þeodguman þōhton tilian
fyllen on fægum; ac him flēah on lāst
earn ætes georn, ūrigfeðera,
salowigpāda sang hildelēoð,
hyrnednebbas. Stōpon heaðorincas,
beornas tō beadowe bordum beðeahte,
hwealfum lindum, þā ðe hwile ær
elðeodigra edwīt þoledon,
hæðenra hosp; him þæt hearde wearð
æt ðām æscplegan eallum forgolden
Assyrium, syððan Ebrēas
under gūðfanum gegān hæfdon
tō ðām fyrdwicum. Hie ðā fromlice
ē ton forð flēogan flāna scūras,
[hilde]nædran of hornbogan,
strælas stedeheardes; styrmðon hlūde
grame gūðfreca, gāras sendon
in heardra gemang; hæleð wæron yrre,
landbūende lāðum cynne,
stōpon styrmōde, stercedferhðe
wrehton unsōfte ealdgeniðlan
medowērige.



'Hwæt' - 'Listen' - the scop begins his epic tale of Beowulf, the longest and most famous of all Anglo Saxon poems and a synthesis of all the themes familiar now.

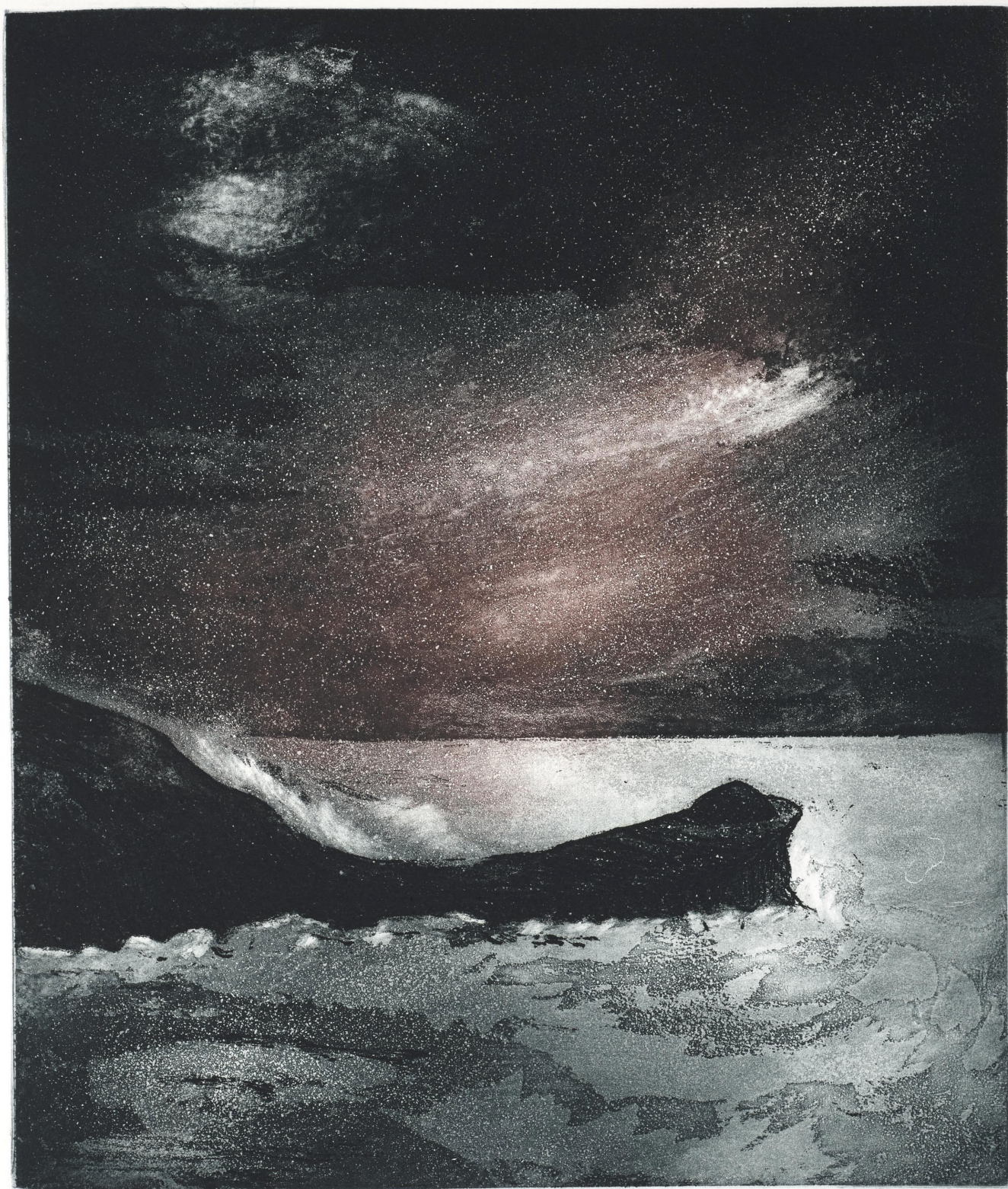
It recounts the legendary exploits of its hero, Beowulf, his triumph over monsters, his loyalty to his king and his generosity to his people, when he himself is king. Beowulf earns for himself the greatest honour a warrior can hope for: glory and riches in his life, a hero's death and the tributes of his sorrowing retainers who raise, over the smoking ashes of his funeral pyre, a mighty barrow.

But as for his people, they are all sparrows who fly in and out of the mead-hall, going from winter into winter, warming themselves only briefly in the glory of Heorot. The prospect of bleak lordlessness after Beowulf's death, the fear of war, captivity and carnage are already presaged at the end of the poem.

Beowulf

Then, on the headland, the people of the Geats made ready for him a massive pyre, hung round with helmets, shields and shining corslets, as he had desired; then the sorrowing men laid in the midst their beloved lord, the famous prince. And there on the cliff the warriors kindled the mightiest of funeral pyres: the dark wood-smoke rose high above the flames, the fire mingled with the sounds of weeping, roaring until the heat at its heart, his bone-house cracked. Wretched in spirit, they mourned their loss, the death of their lord. And likewise, a woman of the Geats with hair bound up sang in grief a lament for him, cried repeatedly how sorely she feared invasion would follow, with untold slaughter, terror of the enemy, humiliation and captivity. The heavens swallowed the smoke. The people of the Geats built for him then, in a place of shelter on the headland a barrow high and broad, visible afar to all seafarers; and in ten days they raised a beacon for the man mighty in battle and enclosed the ashes with as noble a wall as men could devise. They laid in the barrow rings and brooches and all such adornments that warriors had taken earlier from the hoard; they bequeathed to the earth the treasure of men, gold in the ground where it lies still, as useless to men as it was before. Then twelve brave warriors, sons of princes, rode round the barrow minded to utter their grief, keen for their king. They recited a lay that told of that great man: they extolled his noble life and his great deeds of valour. So is it fitting that a man should sing the praises of his dear lord, cherish his memory when he must depart this life. Thus did the people of the Weders, his hearth-companions, mourn the passing of their lord. They said that of all the kings on the earth, he was the gentlest of men and the kindest, most generous to his people and most eager for fame.

Him ðā gegiredan Gēata lēode
 ād on eorðan unwāclīcne,
 helm[um] behongen, hilde-bordum,
 beorhtum byrnum, swā hē bēna wæs;
 ālegdon ðā tōmiddles mārne þēoden
 hāleð hīofende, hlāford lēofne.
 Ongunnon þā on beorge bāel-fýra mæst
 wīgend weccan: wudu-rēc āstāh
 sweart ofer swioðole, swōgende lēg,
 wōpe bewunden — wind-blond gelæg —
 oðþæt hē ðā bān-hūs gebrocen hæfde,
 hāt on hreðre. Higum unrōte
 mōd-ceare mændon, mon-dryhtnes cwealm;
 swylce giōmor-gyd Gēatisc mēowle
 bunden-heorde
 song sorg-cearig. Sæde geneahhe,
 þæt hīo hyre here-geongas hearde ondrēde
 wæl-fylla worn, werudes egesan,
 hȳ[n]ðo ond hæft-nȳd. Heofon rēce swealg.
 Geworhton ðā Wedra lēode
 hlēo on hōe, sē wæs hēah ond brād,
 wēg-liðendum wīde gesȳne,
 ond betimbredon on tȳn dagum
 beadu-rōfes bēcn; bronda lāfe
 wealle beworhton, swā hyt weorðlicost
 fore-snotre men findan mihton.
 Hī on beorg dydon bēg ond siglu,
 eall swylce hyrsta, swylce on horde ær
 nīð-hēdige men genumen hæfdon;
 forlēton eorla gestrēon eorðan healðan,
 gold on grēote, þær hit nū gēn lifað
 eldum swā unnyt, swa hit æror wæs.
 Þā ymbe hlāw riodan hilde-dēore,
 æpelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,
 woldon ceare cwīðan, kyning mēnan,
 word-gyd wrecan ond ymb wer sprecan:
 eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellen-weorc;
 duguðum dēmdon, swā hit gedēfe bið
 þæt mon his wine-dryhten wordum herge,
 ferhðum frēoge, þonne hē forð scile
 of lic-haman lāded weorðan.
 Swā begnornodon Gēata lēode
 hlāfordes hryre, heorð-genēatas;
 cwædon þæt hē wære wyruld-cyninga,
 manna mildust ond mon-ðwærust,
 lēodum liðost ond lof-geornost.



Sometimes a Poet Sang

*is a suite of six etchings by Shirley Jones,
inspired by passages of Anglo Saxon poetry,
hand-set and printed by her in 18-point Baskerville type,
on Barcham Green hand-made paper.*

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This copy is number 20 and was bound by Mary French

according to the original design by

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The Red Hen Press

